

# The Security of the Child's World

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This study describes common situations where children perceive risk and where we, as adults responsible for them, can lend a sense of security to their explorations. I first discuss the texture of risk in children's everyday lives, then indicate how adults can influence this texture of risk by supporting, guiding, and instructing. These are lesser modes of pedagogic presence than are challenging and encountering children if we wish to establish the security of the child's world. Phenomenological description of these various modes shows how children can learn to become responsible for the risks they face and acquire a sense of security that makes certain risks worth taking.

Cette étude décrit des situations courantes dans lesquelles les enfants perçoivent un risque et où nous, en tant qu'adultes responsables de ces enfants, pouvons les rassurer dans leurs explorations. L'auteur discute d'abord de la nature du risque dans le quotidien des enfants, puis indique comment les adultes peuvent intervenir auprès de ceux-ci par leur soutien, leurs conseils et leur enseignement. Il s'agit là, pour qui veut sécuriser l'enfant, de meilleurs modes de présence pédagogique que le fait de le confronter ou de lui lancer des défis. La description phénoménologique de ces divers modes de présence révèle comment les enfants peuvent apprendre à se responsabiliser par rapport aux risques auxquels ils font face et acquérir un sentiment de sécurité qui les incite à considérer qu'il vaut la peine de prendre certains risques.

Latch-key children, sexually abused children, children from dysfunctional homes, abducted children, children in homeless families, street children—all live in a risky and dangerous world. Other children not facing such unfortunate conditions may yet become aware of risk and danger. If left completely to themselves, or if by our actions we disregard their fears and difficulties, children may find themselves exposed to risk.

What are we to do about the security of the child's world? How might those responsible for the care of children ensure that they grow up sensing the security necessary for their growth and development? Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) and subsequent researchers (Ainsworth, Mahler, Sroufe, Winnicott) show how a sense of security can be cultivated. Two main sets of influences contribute to a child's sense of security, namely, the influence of a trustworthy person who can "provide the kind of secure base required at each phase of the life-cycle," and the capacity of another individual to respond in a trusting manner and "to collaborate with that person in such a way that a mutually rewarding relationship is initiated and maintained" (Bowlby,

1979, p. 104). Security comes from being cared for by the mother or the father, and such feelings of security normally allow other adults to take the place of the parent and other places to draw the child beyond the safety of the home. Thus the child comes to explore the world in untroubled security.

But the question of the security of the child's world takes us beyond attachment theory. First, although it requires us to consider the need for attachment to one or more specially loved adults, it stresses the responsibility adults share for ensuring the conditions of children's security. Second, it is a pedagogical question how things ought to be for children, rather than a psychological question why things are as they seem to be for many children. And third, the question of the security of the child's world has to do with the trust, reliance, and self-reliance exhibited in adult-child interactions, but also with the grounds for being able to respond to children. In other words, it requires attentiveness to the conditions that give rise to a child's sense of security in particular situations of risk.

Böllnow wrote of a "pedagogical atmosphere" that could bring a sense of security to childhood exploration. He said:

Only in an atmosphere of security can the child grow in the right direction and only in this medium does the world reveal itself to the child in all its reasonable order. Should this security be missing, then the world remains a shocking, threatening power. And if this sense of security is not guaranteed elsewhere, then the child is refused the will to life, and he or she withers emotionally. (Böllnow, 1970/1989, p. 12)

Genuine pedagogy carefully meets and transcends risks by creating an atmosphere of security. It does not proceed wholly blind to risks nor neurotically exaggerate them, but establishes an atmosphere wherein clear and distinct instances of risk can be experienced. Practically speaking, this means creating places between the home and the world—playgrounds, neighbourhoods, and schools—where children can feel secure and where they can, in due course, venture into an otherwise threatening world. Pedagogically speaking, it means responding to children's difficulties, becoming sensitive to their fears, building upon the trust earlier "invested in a single person [and] now . . . become a more generalized trust in the world" (p. 17; cf. van Manen, 1991, pp. 6, 55–58). We look for situations where responsiveness to children's concerns engenders an atmosphere of security sustaining their movement toward greater independence.

#### THE TEXTURE OF RISK

Let us first consider everyday examples, events of daily life, "small events that are likely to happen in any child's day and that need to be handled as they occur" (Bettelheim, 1962, p. 27). Taken together these events add up to "a good life or a pretty miserable one" (p. 28).

I think of a three-year-old boy wandering the streets near my house. He happily joins the children in our communal playground. Still, I am concerned that his parents may not know his whereabouts. I have him take me to his home to reassure them of his safety. "Don't worry," Stephen's parents tell me, "he knows his way around." I feel a little foolish, not so much for interfering as for being unnecessarily concerned. And yet the response of these parents, who greet me as reasonable people, does not put to rest my concern. Is it desirable to let a three-year-old child find his way around? Their faith in the little boy's capacity to look after himself actually increases my concern, especially when they come knocking on my door long after dark, asking if I have seen their son of late, or if I see him, would I please send him home.

How should I respond? Vandenberg wrote of the obligation we have to help such a child by ensuring his safety as we structure his world "in proportion to his helplessness" and liberate him "for his own possibilities in the world of play" (Vandenberg, 1971, p. 64). By making himself known Stephen obliges me to respond in some measure to the risky texture of his life. Should I leave him alone? Should I take him to his home? Should I follow him to where the other children are playing and monitor his movements in the absence of his parents? Should I stay nearby to ensure that, for now, he is being watched over? These questions call for a *personal* response.

Now you might think this situation is a little out of the ordinary. Consider, then, how the texture of risk and questions of our responsiveness to it are apparent even in the most common of family practices. My son, Tyler, asks one evening: "How come [my sister] sleeps in your room and you get to sleep with Mommy, but I don't have anyone to sleep with?" Is it any wonder that fears arise when in our efforts to do something *for* children (such as providing them with a room of their own) we overlook what we do *to* them and to their sense of security. We leave children at home with a babysitter while we take a well-earned vacation, we drop children off at so-called "parent-free" classes for swimming and gymnastics, and we sign them up for "day-camp" programs as soon as their day care and kindergarten programs go into recess. In situations of parental absence, the risks of everyday life easily become dangers; and to compound things, we give others the job of "educating" our children about the world's dangers and "teaching" them how to defend themselves. Through the rationalization of children's lives we may easily deny our adult responsibility for ensuring the security of their world.

We must be clear what is at stake. I do not wish to conclude from these examples that we do children great harm by leaving them alone. In spite of the dangers portrayed in a recent cinema version of a child being left "home alone," Bettelheim has shown that sometimes the apparent "abandonment" of children is a means to their gaining a sense of independence and personal responsibility for their lives. He said:

The child of school age cannot yet believe that he ever will be able to meet the world without his parents; that is why he wishes to hold on to them beyond the necessary point. He needs to learn that someday he will master the dangers of the world, even in the exaggerated form in which his fears depict them, and be enriched by it. (Bettelheim, 1975, p. 166)

More importantly, there comes a time when children will want to be left alone, when they will want to sleep by themselves, and when they will need to be trusted to explore the neighbourhood unaccompanied by their parents. Before this time it may be appropriate to speak of abandonment, but when children express a desire to venture out on their own a much greater disservice may be done by keeping them in protective custody. If we ignore the moment, rather than bringing a sense of security to children's activity, our presence confines it and taints it with a distrust of the world. The lesson received is that the world is to be feared except when adults are present. By drawing attention to the texture of risk in this manner we deny the very movement toward maturity which prefigures our pedagogic relation to children.

Let us now look more closely at how this texture of risk is modulated not only by the extremes of presence or absence, but more particularly, by certain modes of presence of the adult to the child. Let us see how this texture of risk is softened by surrounding children's actions in an atmosphere of security. After all, atmosphere is not only "the way in which space is lived and experienced. But atmosphere is also the way a teacher is present to children, and the way children are present to the teacher" (van Manen, 1986, p. 36). Atmosphere is affected by the ways in which adults are present for the sake of children's explorations.

#### THE PRESENCE OF ADULTS

A risky situation that stays with me involves taking upper elementary children on a climbing expedition. We are preparing to climb a mountain. For the past few days we have engaged the forty or so children in environmental studies, rock climbing, orienteering, canoeing, and bush-craft activities; throughout each activity we have spoken of the early explorers of this area, the routes they took, and the settlements they established. And all the while Mount Maroon stares down us. Some sketch it, some photograph it, others find faces and forms within it—each anticipating in his or her own way the climb.

The climb up Mount Maroon is not overly taxing. Some sections require ropes, but for the most part it is a five-hour hike and scramble to the top. Nevertheless there is air of uncertainty from the outset. Many of the children seem nervous, and one of them, Chris, is absolutely afraid. Her determination to reach the top is threatened by the fear she has for her safety. Each step pulls her away from where she feels comfortable. The glazed look in her eyes suggests a desire to be anywhere else than where she is now. Her

tentative gropings, her clinging stops, indicate to us that Chris is overpowered by a sense of danger which prevents her from seeing very much at all. Even on the descent, when generally the worst is behind, she still sees danger. She winds her way down, crab-like, unaware of the levelling terrain, unaware of the others who stay with her talking all the while about school, home, and familiar things, and unaware that the seat of her pants will soon wear out. "Not far to go now, Chris. . . . I wonder what the others are doing. . . . Do you think they might be at the bottom yet?" "You're doing really well. This will certainly be something to tell the folks at home about. . . . Hang in there, there's not much farther to go." Chris maintains her posture of fear in spite of, and perhaps because of, the advances of those around her. Their words provide little comfort because they refer to her thoughts of danger and the fear she has for her safety.

It may not be too hard to find all sorts of reasons for this child's fearfulness—prior experiences, a complete lack of self-confidence, an inability to trust others—yet the inescapable fact is that this child is cut off from us. Although her body sends messages to those around her who can offer safety, and although we intend to be there for her, Chris feels marooned. Our actions do not help Chris to take a risk. Our support only exacerbates the situation. "It tries to substitute 'good' feelings for unacceptable ones, to deny the reality of them, or to distract the child. The message the child receives is, 'You shouldn't feel the way you do'" (Snyder, Snyder, & Snyder, 1980, p. 171). So, how should this child be helped? Perhaps we need to turn back the clock to an earlier time in Chris's life, when the texture of risk did not rub so abrasively.

I am playing with a much younger Chris at Lansdowne Playground. She spends her time clambering over decks, climbing ladders and bars, and coming down the small slides; however, she avoids the larger spiralling slide at the farther end of the playground. "I bet you can't come down that one," I say, thinking that the slide's location explains why she has left it alone so far. But my words come as a dare that shows in the cautious way she climbs the steps to the top. Chris calls from the top: "You come down with me!" And having played on the other equipment with her it seems natural to do as she asks. Yet, surprisingly, this child still does not want to come down the slide; instead she comes back down the staircase. "What's the matter?" I ask, thinking of slides twice as high from which I can't keep her away. My question is also tinged with a sense of guilt at having put her in a situation where she had to back down. I press harder: "Why don't you want to come down the slide with *me*?" to which Chris answers, "I'll be upside down." And so I look again at the slide noticing how the protective casing makes it appear to be a tunnel in which one might conceivably turn upside down. Still, I am not satisfied. I have understood the reason Chris gave me but the question of why she would not come down with me remains. Was I wrong to dare her? How might I have encouraged her efforts? Perhaps my *guidance* left too little room for Chris to make her own way. Maybe her

response is meant as something for me to think about, a response that might stop me from bothering her as she tries to come to terms with the challenge of the slide. Or could it be that Chris wants me to be with her in a different way? Perhaps she wants less guidance and more encouragement for the risk she would like to take.

That is the case for some children on another playground. I see three of them of different ages mounting the ladder that leads up to the top of an unusually high slippery slide, one which is probably twice as high as they have seen before. These three chatter among themselves, although from a distance I cannot recognize the gist of their talk. It is possible they are worried about being up so high. But they are not as worried as their mother, who comes running over to them. She calls to them: "Now, how do you think you're going to get down?" She moves even closer so that the children appear to hang directly over her. "I told you not to go up there!" The three children stand rigid, grasping tightly the rails of the ladder. The youngest one starts calling for his mother to come and get him, at which point she reluctantly begins to climb the ladder. As she moves closer she sees that this youngest child is quite fearful. She says, in an attempt to reassure him, "Just stay still, Chrissy, Mommy's scared too." She climbs up to grasp this youngest child and then all four come back down the ladder, quite relieved to be safely on the ground. "I don't want to see any of you going near that slide again," she admonishes them as the children run off to the nearby swings. And as they run off I wonder about the risk of climbing this slide. Where was the danger and what was the source of the children's fear? What was the nature of this parent's concern? She ensured their physical safety, but what did she do for their sense of security? How were these children helped by their mother being there on the playground?

The mother of these three children might stop and reflect upon her own sense of risk and danger. The situation changes for the worse as soon as she arrives on the scene and starts berating her three children. They evidently feel her concern, and with her there, the slide turns into a dangerous thing. This situation is not unlike many others where an adult imposes a sense of normative order on children's activity. *Instructing* the child, the adult tells the child what to do and what to feel about his or her activity. "Instructing a child insinuates that she is not capable of thinking for herself and that she needs an adult to take over. Hence the child becomes weaker, and she may learn to depend on someone else's thinking" (Snyder et al., 1980, p. 170). Of course, instruction has its place, but in the above situation it overlooks the child's place.

Children need help to feel secure in the face of risk. I see my child is afraid to come down the slide. What do I do? Do I cajole him to come down? Am I content to support, guide, and instruct him? I may be tempted to say: "Look at Jamie. See, *he* can do it. You can do it too." But I know this dare may not work. I know how high this slide is for a child. The world looks so far below. And the metal steps are only a precarious connection

between the high platform and the safe ground below. I have been a child and I know this fear. So what do I do? I help my child by being with him in such a way that risks are seen where, without my help, danger might lurk. I help, not so much by looking out for the child's safety, as by caring sufficiently that his explorations can be carried out with an underlying sense of security. Within this perspective I am up there on the slide with the child. Though standing below with outstretched arms and requesting my son to "be careful," in the spirit of the moment I revel with the child in the activity at hand. He takes me up there with him, and in knowing I am there, the activity feels secure. "Watch me, Dad! Watch me!" the child says as he begins to climb the ladder. Part way up he cries: "Are you watching?" Is this a question or a plea? There is a degree of apprehension in this child's voice. He calls again with greater urgency. "Are you watching?" And with a reassuring nod he reaches the top. This child has nothing to show off but himself. He does not necessarily ask that I watch what he can do as if intent on giving a performance. No, the child may only want to feel the security of a protective gaze and to know that he is not alone. This cold metal structure needs a parental warmth.

If the child then becomes anxious on the slide we ought not be unduly concerned, since this anxiety is part of the child's coming to know the world in his or her own way. The child finds distance between the present context of activity and the world he or she knows. A risk is seen in shadowy outline. Our adult obligation, however, is to ensure that this anxiety does not separate the child from the things that are known, and in particular, from us. For example, I recall my child earlier refusing to come down the slide by himself, and I remember his plea that I come down with him. On that occasion I climbed the ladder behind him, and with him nestling against me, plummeted down the slide. "Do it again," he pleaded until the time came when he wanted to try it all by himself. Similarly, we think of the child who will not go upstairs alone. Do we help this child by laughing at his or her fears? Or does our help require us to go up the stairs together and to stay with the child until he or she come to find the upstairs region increasingly familiar?

Langeveld said that "the child's helplessness makes an appeal to us. What will our answer be? It need not be given in words. It may suffice that we are there; our presence may be the guarantee of security" (Langeveld, 1975, p. 7). How should we be there for the child? Does it not depend on the child and on the occasion and on all sorts of factors that cannot be clearly specified and which, when discussed generally, sound like romantic platitudes? Perhaps we should listen to what the child says. "Help me up!" a young Chris calls out, not even looking for ways to pull herself up onto a climbing frame in the park. She wants a boost, a reassuring hand, in order to get started.

## PEDAGOGIC PRESENCE

Too often risky situations put children at risk. Even well-intentioned efforts at times deny children that mode of adult presence that lends security to their explorations. In a children's story called *Michael is Brave* (Buckley, 1971), we find a child enticed up the ladder of a slide by a teacher who thought he could assist a little girl who was already stuck at the top. Michael obliges the teacher, yet with each step up the ladder he becomes increasingly afraid for himself. Once at the top his presence encourages the little girl to go down herself, but Michael is now alone to face a risky situation. The question we might ask of the teacher in this story is: How can she be responsible for both Michael and the little girl? Is it really a matter of Michael being brave in climbing up the ladder to help the other child, or does genuine pedagogy require greater sensitivity to the concerns of both children?

I suggest that being present pedagogically has to do with *challenging* the child with a mindfulness of how the child encounters the world (Smith, 1989). It has to do with seeing risk as the child may come to see it. For example, I see Carson standing above me on the platform at Alice's Playground. I see that, whereas before Carson was content to come down the slide that is attached to this platform, the "fireman's pole" situated off to the side has now caught his eye. I ask if he wants to try sliding down it. "No," he replies rather unconvincingly, thereby convincing me he must really want to try it. "Oh, I bet you could do that," I say as I move underneath him. "Reach out and grab the pole." Carson leans forward and commits himself. "Now jump onto the bar and I'll catch you at the bottom." This he does. He clings momentarily to the pole, then drops clumsily into my arms. "Do you think you can do it again?" I ask. No, once is enough. Carson wants to do other things.

Sometime later I am with Carson at Malmo Playground. I see him climb up to the platform from which a "fireman's pole" is anchored on either side. He moves to the one closest to where I sit on the concrete border of this playground and says: "Watch me go down the pole—with nobody helping me!" He leans forward and tentatively grasps the pole, falls against it with his body, hooks his legs around, and drops to the ground. "Did you see me?" he asks. "I'll do it again." He then calls to me to stand by him. "Why?" I ask. "Because I want you to. I want you to watch me." "But can't I see you from here?" I reply. Carson does not respond directly, he simply requests once again for me to "Come and stand over here." So I move closer and watch him slide down the pole in one motion. "Do you want to see me do it again?" he asks.

I wonder why I must stand so close. Is this another instance of a child being dependent upon adult signs of approval, or is it an occasion for further reflection on the difference between pedagogic and non-pedagogic modes of presence? Perhaps it is an occasion for reflection on our relation to the child



before us, of where we stand with this child, and on what basis, what common experiences, it is possible to stand close by. After all, as Crowe has remarked,

If we never feel even a twinge of apprehension at the unknown, or if we conveniently overlook the fact or have never faced up to it, the chances are that we shall be unreasonably hard on our children. The more we deny our own fears the less self-awareness and confidence we have—and the more likely it is that we shall be particularly hard on them, wanting them not only to be more confident than we are, but more confident than is reasonable or possible. (Crowe, 1984, p. 128)

We look closely at what children are doing and recall our own fears and trepidations. Observing them rekindles the sense of anxiety, along with the joy, spontaneity, and trust in the world, which we remember from childhood (cf. Smith, 1991).

On the basis of these recollections we see children become aware of the risks of their activity. We look at the hesitancy that attends their movements. We see them become fearful, even afraid. Children are done a grave disservice if we leave the matter there, for their fearfulness is related to our attempts to become mindful of them. In other words, it is insufficient to say that children become fearful if our observation explains away their actions and avoids the question of our responsibility for their state of mind; on the contrary, we imagine ourselves taking risks when we look at fearful children. We watch as they navigate between the familiar and the unknown, we share in their discoveries, and we share their failures. Their apprehension strikes at the heart of our concern for them, and as well, our becoming mindful of how the world appears to them.

We see the child as he or she courts fear in various ways. Carson swings on the low bars of the climbing frame; Chris controls her descent on the slide by going down on her stomach. A sense of security comes with these more tentative responses to this playground equipment. And with use the equipment becomes less distant and increasingly familiar. The child's fear of the distant and unknown becomes a questioning of both the world and his or her place within it. If we close our eyes to children's fears, there is the danger of them becoming truly afraid and incapable of taking a risk at all. We remember this from watching Chris on the slide when any admonishment served only as a provocation to which she was even less likely to respond. A dare to come down the slide only accentuates fear. We must simply wait for this child to see for herself what the slide involves. To do otherwise is to jeopardize this possibility of self-disclosure and turn attention to those possibilities that create a fearful state of mind.

Being present pedagogically thus requires that we fully *encounter* the riskiness of the child's activity. A young child on the end of a see-saw giggles each time we bounce her into the air and delights us with her happiness. She allows us to see things afresh and shows us a joy in being

alive. So we bounce her higher and higher, ever mindful of the limits of her trust. Yet this same child cries and clings to us when we put her on a mechanical donkey at the local shopping mall. She becomes terrified, later on, when we make her come with us on a climbing trip. This child asks us to attend to the lived meaning of her activity, to observe the relation that ameliorates the activity's potential for causing distress. And this child asks for something that all children ask for in some way or another: that we encounter the risky nature of her activity by being sensitive to her experiences.

#### AN ATMOSPHERE OF SECURITY

There are probably as many ways of being with children as there are adults and children, and even then these would vary according to time and circumstance. For heuristic purposes, however, as well as for the purpose of sketching a relation that is especially mindful of children's risk-taking, it has been useful to talk of certain ways of being with children, certain modes of presence such as supporting, guiding, and instructing, and to distinguish these from challenging and encountering the child as modes of pedagogic relation. We see nuances of the adult-child relation; the way adults respond to children's activity reveals the texture of risk.

Through reflective awareness of the responses we make and how it is that such responses are possible, we can bring a sense of security to the child's activity and thus create the desired "pedagogical atmosphere." Rephrasing Vandenberg's (1975) usage of this notion, the pedagogical atmosphere is determined by the dispositions children and adults show toward each other. These dispositions furnish the medium within which it is possible for adult and child to be open to one another and for them to be attuned to the possibilities of risk-taking that an activity affords. The pedagogical atmosphere is felt when adults and children enjoy activity together. Challenging the child, becoming mindful of how things appear to the child, and seeking to make of the child's activity a common encounter with risk, are the determinants of this pedagogic atmosphere. These are the atmospheric conditions of our responsibility for children and the dimensions of our thinking about how children can learn to become responsible for themselves as they move beyond us into a risky world.

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